

World War I ignited a wave of patriotism across the country. But some Americans, devoted to their religious beliefs, would become victims of threat and violence, perpetrated by overzealous nationalists and vigilantes.



THE COST OF CONSCIENCE PART 1

by Sara J. Keckeisen

COMING OF THE NIGHT



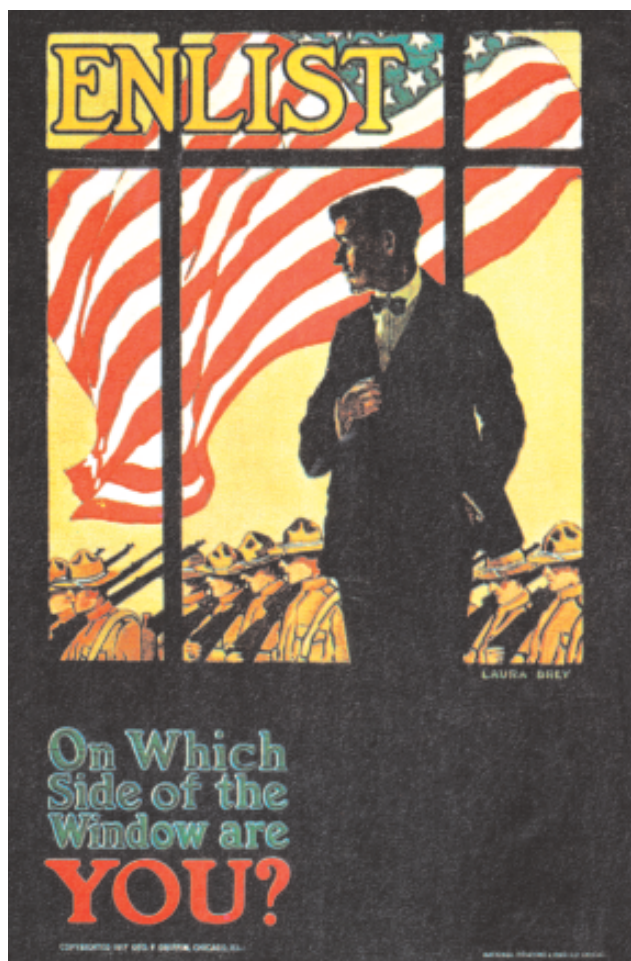
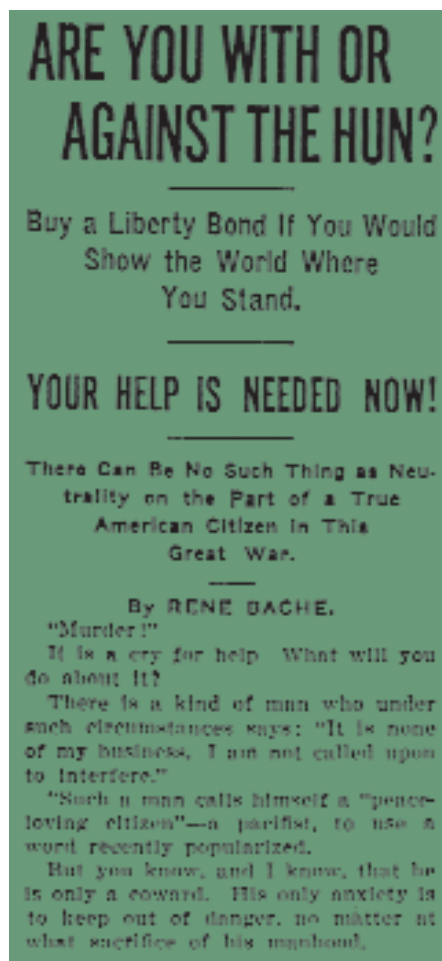
When Gavrilo Princip, a young Serbian nationalist, fired two fatal shots on the streets of Sarajevo in June 1914, he started a cascade of events that led to the First World War. Initially, many Americans were critical of the war “over there” and not interested in the United States becoming involved. In fact, President Woodrow Wilson was narrowly reelected in 1916 under the slogan “He kept us out of war.” Yet, within a year, after Germany authorized its submarines to attack any vessels that they found in the shipping lanes, Wilson led the American charge to join the European conflict. American power and might would end the conflict; this would be the “war to end all wars” and the start of a golden age.

Even though at first reluctant to enter the war, most Americans did come around to support U.S. involvement, and they completely bought into the idea that it was possible to achieve good ends through violent means. The next big question was how to raise troops for the war, the solution to which came through a program of national conscription. The draft, instituted in 1917, raised nearly three-quarters of the 3.5 million American troops who served during World War I. That young men agreed to submit to this abridgement of their personal liberties, and that thousands of other civilians donated their time to serve on local draft boards resulted from, and at the same time perpetuated, an impassioned wave of patriotism quickly spreading across the United States.

Although purchasing bonds was supposed to be voluntary, the national fever of anti-German sentiment (wrong last name or the wrong accent suspect), coupled with the pandemic of patriotic fervor, resulted in placing significant pressure on all citizens to contribute.

This same patriotic zeal also fired the national spirit to help raise the enormous funds needed to pay for the war. Although in 1917 and 1918 the federal government significantly increased taxes, it also instituted the sale of Liberty Bonds and Thrift Stamps. The sale of these bonds and stamps allowed the average American citizen the opportunity to contribute directly to the war effort. When citizens purchased Liberty Bonds, they were “loaning” the government money, with the promise it would be paid back eventually at a 4 percent interest rate. Five Liberty

fervor, resulted in placing significant pressure on all citizens to contribute. Because the entire loan drive was organized down to such a grassroots level, it was virtually impossible for anyone’s noncompliance to escape unnoticed. Nearly every newspaper in America during this time included headlines such as, “Are you with or against the Hun? Buy a Liberty Bond if you would show the world where you stand,” “There can be no such thing as neutrality on the part of a true American citizen in this great war,” and “Buy Liberty Bonds or see U.S. lose.”



The Mennonites had come to America in the 1700s and 1800s from Holland, Germany, and Russia to escape compulsory military conscription. They found in this country the freedom to live as they believed, until the patriotic fervor that swept the United States during World War I brought their beliefs under scrutiny. Newspaper articles such as this from the April 26, 1918, *Inman Review* (left) expressed the sentiment of many zealous patriots who denounced “peace-loving citizens” as cowards who wanted to “keep out of danger.”

Loan drives took place between 1917 and 1919, with the goal of raising \$18.5 billion to fight the war.

The U.S. Treasury Department assigned each state a quota of bonds to sell; the states in turn divided their quotas among their counties. Each city, town, or precinct had its patriotic body that took charge of encouraging the sale of the bonds and achieving the quotas assigned to it. Although the loans were supposed to be voluntary, the national fever of anti-German sentiment and suspicion (that made anyone with the wrong last name or the wrong accent suspect), coupled with the pandemic of patriotic

As Americans climbed more or less willingly onto the government bandwagon of patriotism, nationalism, and anti-Germanism, a group of Americans was caught unaware in the crush. Members of the Anabaptist faith, among which were the Mennonites, were specifically forbidden by their beliefs to engage in war or in any activity that would result in the taking of human life. The Mennonites had come to America in the 1700s and 1800s from Holland, Germany, and Russia to escape compulsory military conscription and to find an environment where they wouldn’t be punished for their nonviolent

timement and suspicion (that made anyone with the
ulted in placing significant pressure on all citizens to contribute.

beliefs. Mennonites had found in America the freedom to live as they believed; in exchange for this freedom, they had been in the vanguard to open up the middle west to settlement and had helped to change this area into the "bread basket" of America. They were careful, thrifty, and successful farmers, largely a rural people. And although not all Mennonites agreed on the extent to which traditional teachings should be accommodated to U. S. society, one of the core tenets was their belief in nonviolence and nonresistance. Mennonites could not take up arms against Ger-

however, had been in America for several generations. They were known as good neighbors and good farmers—an upstanding, God-fearing people.

When the United States government declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, the Mennonite community could not morally support the action. However, when the government raised taxes to support the war, the Mennonites were willing, as always, to pay them. But it was the "voluntary" purchase of Liberty Bonds that proved to be the line that Mennonites could not

To raise funds for the war effort, the U.S. Treasury Department assigned each state a quota of bonds to sell. Each city, town, or precinct had its patriotic body that encouraged the sale of bonds to achieve the assigned quotas. The May 3, 1918, *Inman Review* (right) expressed the prevailing attitude that it was the "Duty of Everyone to Help . . . Our People Must Spend or Be Spent." Regardless of their religious tenets, Mennonites were expected to contribute their share.



**BUY LIBERTY BONDS
OR SEE U. S. LOSE**

**Add to Funds That Will Forever
End Germany's Desired
Iron-Hand Rule.**

DUTY OF EVERYBODY TO HELP

**Question Is Not Whether We Feel
Like Subscribing, but Our People
Must Spend or Be
Spent.**

**By ALBERT BUSHNELL HART,
Of the Vigilantes.**

Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof—so runs the legend on the Liberty bell, which by a favorite tradition pealed out to the world the tidings of the birth of the United States of America on that famous July 4, 1776. We thought that message had gone out once for all; that freedom in the United States was a rock of Gibraltar that could not be scaled nor penetrated nor moved. We have thought that the old days of na-

many, no matter what Germany had done, and they could not voluntarily support, monetarily or in any other way, actions that would lead to the death of others.

Because of their religious beliefs, Mennonites were on a direct collision course with the U.S. government and with the juggernaut of patriotic fanaticism that it had unleashed.

McPherson, Harvey, Marion, and Reno Counties in Kansas were home to large Mennonite communities. Some of these Mennonite farmers had recently arrived in Kansas and still spoke with the Germanic accents of their countries of birth. Many families,

They saw Liberty Bonds, Thrift Stamps, the Red Cross, and the YMCA as private entities directly and inextricably linked with the war effort, and they could not support them.

This was a difficult stand to take. McPherson, Harvey, Marion, and Reno Counties, like all Kansas counties, had bond sale quotas they needed, and wanted, to meet or exceed. Counties competed with each other to see whose citizens were "100 percent patriotic" and could achieve their quotas first. Local papers regularly published the names of "slackers" who had not purchased bonds or contributed to the Red Cross.

Citizens began organizing themselves into “patriotic” committees to try to encourage “slackers” to increasingly frequent, and many Mennonite families lived under the threat, if not the fear, of ret

he Mennonites in these Kansas communities tried to keep their heads down as best they could. They continued to pay their taxes regularly. When a national draft was instituted on June 5, 1917, church leaders, while petitioning Congress to allow their adherents exemption from military service, nevertheless urged their young men to register (as conscientious objectors) with the local draft boards. No church prohibition existed against merely registering, thus the Mennonites complied with the law to the extent they were able.

fight in this great war to extend American values to the rest of the world.

These citizens began organizing themselves into “patriotic” or “vigilance” committees to try to encourage these “slackers” to change their minds. Teachers were dismissed if they tried to present other than the allied view of reasons for the war. John Noll, an honor student at Fort Hays Normal School, was assaulted and expelled from school for telling a fellow student, “You have to pretend you are for the war in order to get by.” A

DISLOYALISTS ARE WARNED

Barton County Night Riders Serve Notice That They Will Punish All Pro-Germans.

“Join the Night Riders. Our motto, ‘True blue Americans.’ Our aim is to clean up the county of German spies, German sympathizers and dirty slackers. We are now among you, and know all of those who are secretly traitors to the country, and these parties may expect a visit from us. There is no neutral ground. You are either for or against the government. Line up and get right. (Signed) Boss Rider.”

This warning was circulated by the thousands throughout Barton county the other night by members of a mysterious organization of loyalist night riders, whose activities are said to be directed against the alleged leaders of pro-German sentiment and obstructionists in certain communities of the county largely populated by people either of German birth or descent.

There is no clue to the identity of



Mennonites saw Liberty Bonds, Thrift Stamps, the Red Cross, and the YMCA as private entities directly and inextricably linked with the war effort and would not contribute to them. As a result, Mennonites often were viewed as German spies and sympathizers. In the April 26, 1918, Inman Review (left) the “Night Riders” warned the pacifists that “disloyalists” would be punished.

Although the federal government theoretically recognized the rights of conscientious objectors, its attitude was more of a benevolent condescension. Its leaders simply couldn’t understand religious beliefs that were fundamentally unshakable. And because there was no clear direction from the top for tolerance of differing views on the war, misguided “patriots” at the local level saw Mennonites only as those who did not dress or behave as they did; who frequently had German names and, even worse, often spoke with German accents; who would not support the brave boys at the front by participating in war bond drives; who would not display the American flag; and who would not send their sons to

call was issued for volunteers for the Barton County “Night Riders,” whose stated aim was to rid that county of “German spies, German sympathizers, and dirty slackers.” Vigilantes visited Mennonite farmers who did not contribute to the Red Cross or buy bonds, and they “confiscated” the farmers’ cattle to sell for the war effort. Mennonite churches that refused to display the American flag had their doors and walls painted yellow. In 1918 Bernhard Harder, pastor of the Emmaus Mennonite church in Butler County, and his family were threatened by a mob even though he had counseled his congregation to buy bonds and had agreed to display an American flag on his front porch.

to change their minds. Violence against the Mennonite community became retribution should they not support the war effort.

The mob finally was dispersed when Harder, from his porch, proposed they all join in singing "America." As Harder lustily sang four full verses of the song, the voices of the "100 percent Americans" trailed off after the first verse, and they gradually drifted away, out-Americanized by a Mennonite German-American.

Violence against the Mennonite community became increasingly frequent, and because local authorities often seemed disinclined to do anything about it, many Mennonite families in south-central Kansas lived under the threat, if not the fear, of

Newspapers, such as the March 29, 1918, McPherson Democrat-Opinion (right), were filled with articles and advertisements supporting the war effort and encouraging people to purchase their share of Liberty Bonds and "keep our county out of the slacker list."

retribution should they not support the war effort. The Coopriders family of McPherson County was no exception.

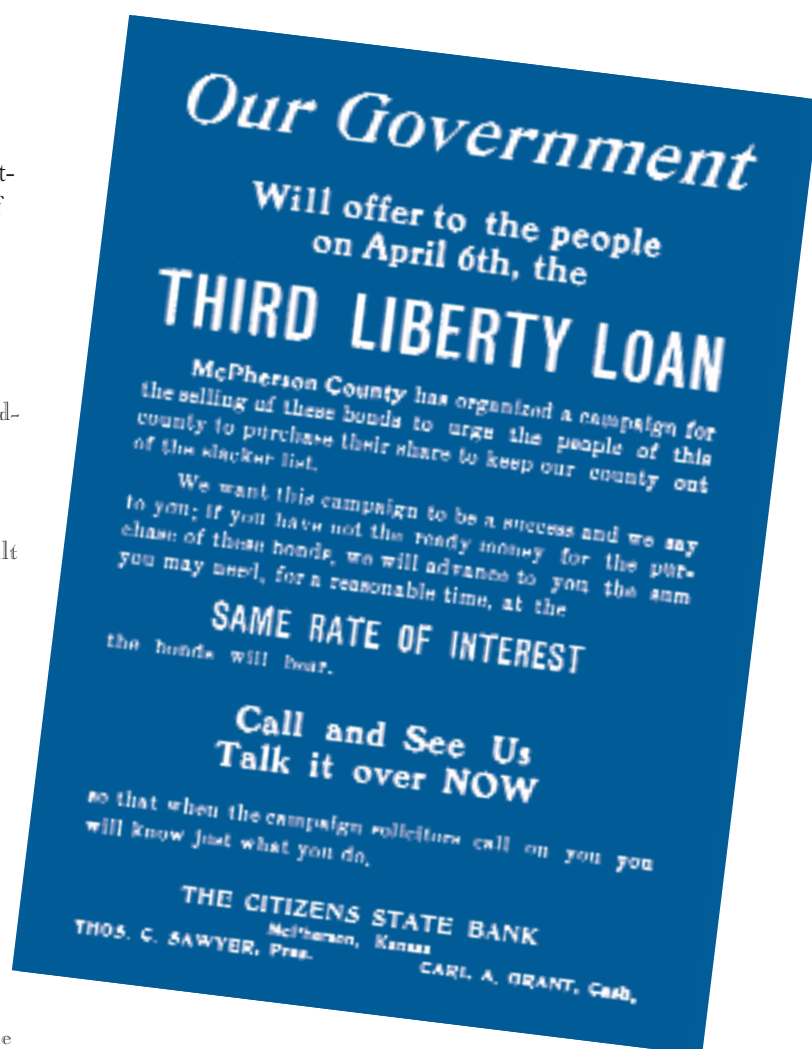
Mathias Coopriders came to Kansas from Indiana in 1876. He bought 160 acres of railroad land and eventually built up his holdings to 400 acres of fertile farmland in Groveland Township, McPherson County, raising corn and wheat. He built a substantial two-story, foursquare clapboard farmhouse on his property and raised his large family there.

Although the Coopriders were of German descent, the family had been in America since Colonial times. Mathias had not always been a Mennonite; he had, in fact, served as a private in Company G of the Fifty-ninth Indiana Infantry during the Civil War. By the time he arrived in McPherson County, Mathias had been widowed twice. With three young sons to raise, he found his third wife and inspiration in Susan Heatwole Brunk. Susan was the widow of ardent Mennonite Henry Brunk, who had spent more than two years on the run to avoid being conscripted into the Confederate Army in their home state of Virginia. After the war Henry, his wife, and their six children headed west and finally settled in Marion County, Kansas. Shortly after they arrived, Henry and two of the children died of typhoid fever.

The Coopriders and the Brunks were neighbors in Marion County; bonds of mutual need and friendship resulted in the 1878 marriage of Susan and Mathias. Two years later they moved to McPherson County and set up their home. Three more

children were born of this union.

Mathias embraced the Mennonite faith of his new wife; he was so devoted to his new faith that, in 1885, he was ordained as a minister and became the pastor of the West Liberty Mennonite Church in McPherson County. All of the Coopriders children were baptized into the Mennonite Church. In 1889 Mathias's second son, Walter, married Susan's second daughter,



Minnie. Walter and Minnie's three sons, George, Henry, and Glen, also were baptized, as young men, into the Mennonite Church.

Walter and Minnie Coopriders and their family lived with Mathias and Susan on the McPherson County homestead, where the two men farmed together. The Coopriders were successful farmers and faithful attendees at the West Liberty Mennonite Church. George, Henry, and Glen learned from their

The night riders surrounded the house and called for the “slacker” to come out. They seized George, and forced him to lie down on a sheet covered with feathers and roll on it. Then, as quick

Sunday School and at the feet of their parents and grandparents the basic precepts of their faith, among which was that participating in war and taking revenge or taking a life was entirely wrong.

In 1917 the National Conscription Act required the registration of all young men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty. George, twenty-four, and Henry, twenty-one, dutifully registered but continued to help their father and grandfather farm, hoping that their efforts to produce food to feed the country

dug deeply into their pockets to fund the war. When they saw the sons of their Mennonite neighbors still working on the farm (even though Congress, in March 1918, had authorized the granting of farm furloughs as an acceptable means of alternative service), when they saw the names of those neighbors showing up on the slacker lists for not buying war bonds, and when they passed those Mennonite farms and did not see an American flag fluttering on the porch, their resentment began to boil over.

Form 1

REGISTRATION CARD No. 33.

1	Name in full	George W. Coopriders		Age	24
2	Home address	McPherson		State	Kansas
3	Date of birth	November 3	1892		
4	Are you (1) a natural-born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)?	Natural			
5	Where were you born?	Knoxland Miss	Kansas	U.S.A.	
6	If not a citizen, of what country are you a subject or subject?				
7	What is your present trade, occupation, or office?	Farmer			
8	By whom employed?	myself			
9	Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 18, or a sister or brother under 18, wholly dependent on you for support (specify which)?	no			
10	Married or single (which)?	single	Race (specify which):	Caucasian	
11	What military service have you had? Rank	None			
12	Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)?	yes Mennonite			
I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true.					
Geo. W. Coopriders (Signature or mark)					

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1917

would be allowed to pass as their war effort.

The local political climate, however, was becoming increasingly patriotic, anti-German, and anti-Mennonite. Like others counties, McPherson County was zealous in showing the flag and pushing Liberty Bond sales. Less than two weeks after the third Liberty Bond campaign started in April 1918, the McPherson Democrat-Opinion proudly announced that the county had already over-subscribed its quota of bond sales. The county was equally zealous in publishing its list of slackers. Citizens saw their sons being called off to fight in Europe, and they themselves dug deeply into their pockets to fund the war. When they saw

When the National Conscription Act required the registration of all young men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty, George Coopriders, twenty-four, and his brother Henry, twenty-one, dutifully registered but continued to help their father and grandfather farm, hoping that their efforts to produce food to feed the country would be allowed to pass as their war effort.

alter Coopriders had not been feeling well all day on April 22, 1918. As the sun went down, both he and eighty-two-year-old Mathias were resting. George and Henry had come in from the fields, washed up, and the family had eaten dinner.

Suddenly the evening peace was disturbed by the sounds of cars coming up the drive. Glancing out the front windows, the family could see the headlights of about forty vehicles pulling into the front yard. Dark figures, some wearing masks, climbed out of the vehicles. The vigilantes surrounded the house and called for the “slacker” Walter Coopriders to come out. They demanded that he buy war bonds or, “We’re going to tar and feather you.” The family inside the house was petrified, but the teachings of the Mennonite faith forbid the use of violence, even to defend oneself. Walter rose to go out to meet the men in his front yard. The light from the house illuminated the closest of the visitors, and Walter had no trouble recognizing many of them, despite their masks. Henry later remarked that several of the participants were nearby neighbors, people whom the Coopriders had assumed were their friends. Walter explained to the mob that his religious beliefs forbade him to buy war bonds or display a flag or anything else that fostered war. The mob surged forward, but before they could lay hands on Walter, twenty-four-year-old George stepped out from the house, explained to the mob that his father had not been well, and offered himself instead. The men seized George,

orge, painted his head, neck, and shoulders with warm roof-
kly as they had arrived, they left.

down on a sheet covered with feathers and roll on it. Then, as quickly as they had arrived, they left. The mob regrouped and drove twenty-three miles to the eastern edge of McPherson County, where at about two A.M. they smeared tar on the threshold of the Spring Valley Mennonite Church and tarred and feathered its pastor, D. A. Diener, and his son Charles.

In the April 26 issue of the McPherson Weekly Republican, the county chairman of the third Liberty Loan drive, Robert Sohlberg, spoke against the mob violence visited upon the

fever.

Despite the threats and violence from the “night riders” who visited the Coopriders home that April evening, the family, like other area Mennonites, remained dedicated to their beliefs of nonviolence. They would survive the tests put to them during 1918, but another challenge awaited twenty-one-year-old Henry Coopriders, who, in the fall of that year, found himself aboard a train bound for Camp Funston on the Fort Riley Military Reservation. There he would be asked to ignore his faith and

Although the McPherson Daily Republican published an account of the attack on George Coopriders (right), the actions of the “night riders” were accepted by the community, and no action was taken to identify and punish the perpetrators.



Coopriders and Diener families, but by and large the actions of the “night riders” were accepted by the local government and the community, and no action was taken to identify and punish the perpetrators. Two days after the mob had tarred and feathered his son, Walter Coopriders went to McPherson and invested in some Liberty Bonds. Five months later, on September 5, 1918, his second son, Henry, was drafted.

The federal government had been aware, from the beginning of hostilities in 1914, that there existed in the country a significant minority of young men who would refuse to participate in combatant roles due to religious or political beliefs. From President Wilson on down, however, those in authority had a hard time taking seriously those beliefs in nonresistance. Government officials hoped and believed that once these simple rural boys were removed from the insularity of their homes and families they would drop their odd beliefs and catch the proper patriotic

join the ranks as a soldier.

The experience of young Mr. Coopriders during the latter months of 1918 became one of struggle and strength and a true [test](#) of his convictions. “Henry’s Story,” part two of “The Cost of Conscience,” will appear in the winter 2004 issue of Kansas Heritage, coming in December of this year.

SARA KECKEISEN is a research librarian in the Society’s Library and Archives Division. She wishes to thank Fred Coopriders, son of George Coopriders, and James Coopriders, son of Henry Coopriders, for their help and inspiration in writing this article.

USE TAR AND FEATHERS.

**DRASTIC MEASURES TAKEN
WITH MEN ACCUSED OF DIS-
LOYAL UTTERANCES.**

**D. A. Diener of Spring Valley and
George Coopriders of Groveland
Township the Men Treated.**

For some time past there has been a current of much dissatisfaction in this county among the loyal citizens concerning the disloyal utterances and actions of a few of their neighbors. Last night the current gained force, and a party said to have numbered about forty citizens from all sections of the county gathered, and used strenuous methods to force some of these disloyalists to fall in-to line. It is understood that a good portion of these vigilantes, were residents of the same community as the men visited.